

# Tips from a Market Researcher

BY MADELYN HOCHSTEIN

*Guest editor's note: Madelyn Hochstein has been involved with the work of the Center on Municipal Government Performance at the Fund for the City of New York and its affiliated national organization, the National Center for Civic Innovation, since 1995. She helped test market research tools she uses in her work with the private sector to see if they can shed light on the question of how the public judges local government performance. She helped design and conduct the focus group research that has formed the basis for the book Listening to the Public: Adding the Voices of the People to Government Performance Measurement and Reporting. She has met with grantees from the national Government Performance Reporting Trailblazer Grant program and designed workshops that guide government employees who are seeking to learn more about the public's point of view. We asked her to distill some of her observations and recommendations.*

I am delighted to share my observations. I have been impressed by the groundbreaking efforts to bring the public's voice into government performance measurement in a meaningful way.

The first observation that I would offer governments that are considering citizen surveys or focus groups is a broad and encouraging one. These research methods that are used in private sector market research definitely will work for municipal governments that want to reliably and systematically learn how the public thinks about, and judges, government performance.

## Citizen Surveys Versus Focus Groups

Citizen surveys and focus groups are not interchangeable techniques. Each has a unique purpose.

*Surveys* are used when we want to know *how many*. For instance, how many people use which services, or how satisfied or dissatisfied are they about each service, and the like. *Focus groups* are used when we want to know *what* and *why*: What do citizens really think about the government services they receive? What makes them think what they think? What clues and cues do they use to judge government services?

Citizen surveys and focus groups can be used together or separately. Focus groups are an excellent prelude to a first citizen survey to help identify the measures and the language. Focus groups help us know what to measure and what words to use to be sure the person answering a survey understands what you want to know. In private sector market research, this is called consumer language.

Focus groups can also be very useful after a citizen survey is completed to help explain the statistics that come out of the survey. For example, one can further delve and ask, "Why did so many people rate the police or sanitation departments the way they did?" Or, "What is it about the condition of the roads and streets that leads to low ratings?"

Focus groups can stand alone as a technique that offers enormous insight into how people rate each government service and why. Focus group results can supply clear guidance for improving government performance and how people rate government. But beware: focus groups do not produce hard numbers or projectable results; only surveys can do that. The *Listening to the Public* work of the Center on Government Performance is testimony to how much can be learned from focus groups. Focus groups are also an excellent method for getting citizen input on the style and content of performance reports to the public and on how best to disseminate such reports.

I'd like to add one point here: There is no substitute for the real thing. When I talk about focus groups and citizen surveys, I'm referring to very specific research techniques that provide certain kinds of information from the widest possible spectrum of people in a jurisdiction and present the information impartially and reliably. Although there are a great deal of data available from sources other than these primary research techniques, such as public hearings and tapes and letters of complaint, these are not sources that will yield a full understanding of the public's view of government performance. People who comment at public hearings or lodge complaints have a particular ax to grind and in no way represent the full perspective of a population.

Whether doing focus groups or citizen surveys, it is important to set clear objectives before doing anything else. The secret to successful research is to take the time to define the objectives: what you want to learn and why you want to learn it, and what you plan to do with the information you learn. Once the objectives are set, you have the framework for deciding everything else about the research—which method to use, whom to talk to, what questions to ask, and the like.

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### **Defining the Sample: The Importance of Inclusiveness**

One critical difference that I see between private sector market research and government citizen research is in defining the sample—who should be interviewed

in the citizen survey or who should participate in the focus groups. More and more in the private sector, research is conducted among niches or specific demographic groups (youth, moms of small children) or specific behavioral groups (baseball fans, soda drinkers) or attitudinal groups (conservative voters). For governments wanting to learn what citizens think, the exact opposite should apply. Inclusiveness is a must. All steps possible should be taken to ensure that the survey sample or the focus group participants reflect the demographic diversity of a jurisdiction; to the greatest extent possible, no group should be left out. These are some of the things to consider when defining survey samples and focus group participant definitions to be sure of inclusiveness:

- Neighborhoods, precincts, wards
- Ethnic and racial groups
- Income and education groups
- Age groups
- Marital and family composition groups
- Religious orientations
- Political orientations

### **Bringing in the Experts**

Whether doing focus groups or citizen surveys, bring in the experts. Professional, technical expertise at planning, organizing, and conducting focus groups and surveys is strongly recommended. The experts have the skills to do the research without the baggage that could hinder inclusiveness and free flow of ideas. I recommend that firms associated with political polling, especially for the jurisdiction's elected officials, should be avoided completely. If budgets are tight, a local firm may be willing to help pro bono, or the local university or college might lend its expertise. It is best to conduct surveys or focus groups at a neutral time of the year, avoiding elections, holidays, and vacation periods.

### **Conducting Focus Groups**

The process for recruiting participants should be anonymous in two ways. First, the participants should not know who the research is being con-

ducted for; second, participants should not know each other so that honest, open discussion takes place. In very small communities where most everyone knows everyone else, this rule can be suspended, but careful instruction is necessary to allow all participants to speak freely.

Potential participants should not be told what the subject of the discussion will be so that there is no rehearsing. Participants should be systematically screened to be sure they meet specifications and to identify any potential problems with language or understanding that preclude participation. In some cases, multilingual screening and bilingual focus group moderators are needed.

Focus groups usually have eight to ten participants each and run for about two hours. The number of focus groups to conduct is governed by how diverse a community is and therefore how many separate population groups must be heard from. However, in reality the number of groups may be governed by budget availability. Just be as inclusive as possible and avoid doing only one focus group; that could be misleading.

Focus groups should be held at a professional focus group facility if at all possible; they have one-way mirrors so that observers can watch without distracting the participants. Focus groups should be recorded (audio and video if possible), but all the observers should take notes.

The focus group moderator should be a professional moderator if at all possible. His or her role is critical to the success of the focus group in that he or she prepares a detailed discussion guide, makes sure all the material is covered, keeps the group moving in an orderly fashion, makes sure that no one participant dominates the group, and ensures that all participants get to have their say.

Invite elected and appointed officials to observe (but not participate in) the focus groups; support from the top is essential, and the best way to ensure it is

by letting “the top” in. It is best for these observers, who might be recognized by participants, to arrive after the participants have been convened in the discussion room.

### Conducting Citizen Surveys

Do some homework first. Surveys are all about phrases such as *reliability*, *confidence level*, *response rate*, *sampling frame*, and *sampling error*, so if one is not trained in or has forgotten basic statistics and sampling, one must bone up on them. Even if a professional research firm is employed to actually do the survey, it is important to understand all the technical aspects oneself.

There are a number of types of survey methods that could be used. The interviewing could be done by mail, telephone, and Internet, or at specific sites. Each has advantages and disadvantages relating to budget, reliability, inclusiveness, projectability, and so on. A professional expert will help sort through all the pros and cons and come to a decision about which method to use. I'll make this recommendation: if the budget and timetable allow it, the best bet to ensure a truly representative sampling of a community is the telephone method, possibly with some special techniques for hard-to-reach subpopulations.

Another issue to decide on with the expert is sample size, that is, how many people you will interview. The sample size is driven by how many subgroups you wish to isolate in your analysis—the total population only, or specific neighborhoods, ethnic groups, income groups, and the like. The more subgroups you want to include in the analysis, the larger the overall sample will have to be (and the larger the budget).

The wording of the questions in the survey is very important. Again, the professional expert takes the lead in crafting a questionnaire that meets your objectives and is clear and understandable to the people being interviewed. Be sure to pretest the questionnaire with a diverse set of respondents to be sure

it works for all groups in the community. If survey time permits, open-ended questions that allow the respondent to explain why, for example, he or she rated a service a certain way are an excellent idea. The more you understand the whys behind the survey answers, the more likely you are to develop the right solutions to resolving poor ratings or bolster practices that led to good ratings.

With a professional firm or consultant conducting the survey, it's tempting to step back and let the pro take over, but I'd say you should stay involved throughout the whole process, from planning and execution of the data collection to data processing to analysis and reporting. Only you truly know the objectives, and in the end only you will have to use the results, not the professional.

### Data Analysis and Reporting

Whether you've done focus groups or a citizen survey or both, in the end it comes down to analysis and reporting. This is the most important part. You're turning data—information—into understanding, insight, and ultimately action. This is also the fun part, when you begin to see all your efforts pay off. It is vital that you be involved in this step. Yes, your professional expert or focus group moderator will furnish you with a report, but that's not

where the process ends. It's really up to you to create the final analysis and report.

In analyzing the focus group results, go back to the groups over and over again. Listen to the tapes, review your notes, and discuss your observations with the others who attended the groups. Search out the common themes across participants' comments. Really dig for a deep and clear understanding of what your citizens have to say about their government.

Analyzing citizen survey results is much more straightforward than analyzing focus group discussions. After all, you have hard numbers to work with. But reporting the numbers should not be just recitation; it should tell a story, the story of how your citizens judge their government and its services, why, and most important what actions are suggested to improve government performance.

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